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News Items:
 Headlines
 News Briefs
 Stories
 Movies
 Word To Life
 Special Items:
 Vatican
 Election 2004
 Africa
 Charter update
 John Jay study
 Other Items:
 Client Area
 Links
 Archives:
 Origins

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CNS Story:

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Officials say pope, Reagan shared Cold War data, but lacked alliance

By Agostino Bono
 Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Two top foreign policy officials in the administration of the late President Ronald Reagan have said he and Pope John Paul II shared information about the Cold War but did not engage in coordinated actions to topple the Soviet bloc.

"We were more interested in having the pope on our side and not in having him do something for us," said Edward Rowny, Reagan's main adviser and negotiator on nuclear arms talks.

Richard V. Allen, Reagan's 1981-82 national security adviser, said there was "a convergence of interests" but not an alliance between the United States and the Vatican during the Reagan presidency.

Reagan was president from 1981 to 1989, a period that saw the Soviet Union lose its political hold on its East European allies, which led to the eventual breakup of the Soviet Union and the peaceful end of communist governments in the Soviet bloc. Pope John Paul was elected in October 1978.

Both are considered pivotal figures in ending the Cold War; there often has been speculation that Reagan and the pope -- both strongly anti-communist -- worked together to topple communist rule in Europe.

Rowny, who briefed the pope four times on Reagan's behalf, was interviewed Nov. 12 by Catholic News Service. Allen gave a Nov. 14 talk at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington on the pope, Reagan and the collapse of communism.

Allen said the pope and Reagan were on "parallel tracks" in the Cold War, but the pope was primarily interested in the situation in his native Poland while "President Reagan and the United States thought of Poland as a means to the disintegration and collapse of the main danger, the main adversary, the Soviet Union."

Rowny, a Polish-American, said that although his task was to brief the pope on arms reduction talks the pope would quickly turn the topic to Poland.

"He wanted me to tell him about Reagan's views of Solidarity and a free Poland," said Rowny, referring to the independent trade union movement that became the leading opposition group to the Polish communist government in the 1980s.

The pope "was always pleased to hear that the president backed Solidarity," said Rowny.

Both Reagan officials said the pope was happy to learn that the United

States was smuggling aid to Solidarity, although they described the aid as modest.

The pope also wanted to know how Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was as a negotiator, said Rowny, now a Washington-based international consultant.

"The pope was fascinated with Reagan's ability to negotiate with Gorbachev," he said.

Rowny said Reagan believed that the fact that Pope John Paul was Polish would be an important factor in the eventual liberation of Poland.

Allen said that although he was quoted 12 years ago as saying that the Vatican and the United States formed "the greatest secret alliance in history" he meant it "as a metaphor, not as a statement of fact."

"Not once, to my knowledge, did Washington and the Vatican plan jointly to achieve a policy objective," said Allen, currently a senior fellow at the Hoover Institute on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University in California.

Reagan's aim was to keep the pope informed, which included showing him satellite photos of Soviet deployments of troops and weapons in Poland and other East European members of the Soviet bloc, he said.

"What Rome did with the information it received, if anything at all, was entirely Rome's business," he said.

Allen, a Catholic, said Reagan used other prominent Catholics in his government to brief the pope. These included CIA Director William Casey and roving ambassador Gen. Vernon Walters, he said.

Casey would fly secretly to Rome in a windowless C-141 black jet and "be taken undercover to the Vatican," said Allen.

Both officials said that the public stances of the Vatican did little to influence either U.S. or Soviet policy.

The pope often spoke of the need for arms reductions, but the United States and the Soviet Union already had their own agendas and timetables, said Rowny.

Allen said that "Rome was not a consideration over what Reagan wished to define as our own interests," but Reagan hoped that channeling information to the Vatican would produce quiet benefits.

One possible benefit of showing the pope satellite photos of Soviet missile deployments in Eastern Europe was a lack of papal criticism of a counterdeployment of U.S. weapons in Western Europe, he said.

"While generally opposed to the spread of weapons, the Vatican did not publicly oppose this deployment, and one can only conclude that it was a result of the constant briefings that Pope John Paul had received from Casey and Walters," Allen said.

Rowny said there was a difference in the attitudes between the pope and Vatican officials involved in foreign policy matters. The officials were cool to the United States and favored a neutral position in the Cold War, he said.

"On arms control, they thought we were too hard on the Russians," he said.

But in private one-on-one meetings with the pope, his attitude and gestures showed that he supported Reagan, said Rowny.

"He (the pope) had to be careful in what he said," Rowny added.

END

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